

5. SCIENTIFIC VALUE OF THE COLLECTIONS

This general review shows that NMNHS's avian collection is of great scientific and cultural value, due to the following facts:

- it is a historical collection from eminent collectors and from localities which in part have since been devastated or have disappeared;
- it contains taxa which now rarely reach collections as they are either fossil, extinct, rare or now protected under CITES;
- it contains curious specimens: unique and famous specimens, avian bones worked by prehistoric humans, plumage colouration abnormalities, pathological abnormalities;
- it contains large samples of several species and has a broad representation of taxa.

The Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*) has been extinct since early 20th century (DAY 1981; DEL HOYO 1994) and the Alagoas Curassow (*Mitu mitu*) does no longer occur in the wild. The NMNHS avian collection contains at least 56 species which are now threatened with global extinction (WORLD CONSERVATION MONITORING CENTRE 1993). Their 431 specimens (table 3) represent a valuable source for examination of taxonomy, external and internal morphology, adaptations, former distribution, etc.

Ten subspecies, described from specimens of south-east European populations, are represented as skins in the collection: *Erithacus rubecula balcanicus*, *Picoides syriacus balcanicus*, *Picoides major candidus*, *Picus viridis dofleini*, *Picus canus perspicuus*, *Picoides minor serbicus*, *Galerida cristata meridionalis*, *Eremophila alpestris balcanica*, *Sitta neumayer neumayer*, *Parus montanus montanus*, *Primella collaris subalpina*, *Carduelis carduelis balcanica*, and *Corvus corone sardonius*. All these taxa are considered as valid by HOWARD & MOORE (1980). Some taxa, now synonymised, have been described with material of the NHMNS: for example *Plasiannus colchicus europaens* HACHISUKA (1937). Despite the synonymy, they reflect the former stage of the development of avian taxonomy and have a valuable historical significance. The type was part of the ornithological collection, but meanwhile its whereabouts is unknown.

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The Past and Present State of Bird Collections in the Zoological Museum of the Department of Vertebrate Zoology, St. Petersburg University

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Abstract. The Zoological Museum was founded in 1819 simultaneously with the University, mostly for study purposes. During the 19th and 20th century, due to numerous zoological expeditions and some valuable presents from other museums and individuals, the collections constantly increased. Today the ornithological collections contain about 7,000 specimens in 1,100 species from various regions of the world. These are stuffed birds and skins (ca 4,500), skeletons (150), alcohol specimens (150), frozen/buffered tissue samples (140), nests (ca 100), eggs sets (ca 800), and records of bird vocalisations. The bird fauna of the former Soviet Union is represented most completely. Practically all of the 768 recorded species are available, including rare and Red Data Book species. Many species are represented by geographical series of skins and mounted birds in different plumage. The Animal Sound Library of the Museum consists of more than 5,000 recordings from more than 400 species, including especially birds but also amphibians, reptiles and mammals. Bird recordings come from Russia, Crimea, Caucasian mountains, and the deserts and highlands of the Central Asia. Antarctica, Bulgaria and Alaska are also represented in the collection. The museum and its library is accessible for study, not only for zoologists and students of St. Petersburg University, but any persons from outside working in zoology and bioacoustics are welcome to use it.

Key words. St. Petersburg museum, ornithology, skins, avian collection, bird recordings

1. HISTORY

The Zoological Museum – originally the Zoological Cabinet of Department of Zoology – was founded in 1819. At the same time the University in its central building „Twelve Collegiac“ was founded. The museum served mostly for study purposes, although there is no information about any collections from that time. We only know that a curator was included in the staff of the Cabinet.

A considerable increase of the museum collections happened later when in 1833 Stepan KUTORGA became head of the department. Prof. KUTORGA studied bird anatomy and provided a special course in ornithology. In the museum there are still some mounted specimens from that time. Karl KESSLER, a student of Stepan KUTORGA, followed him as head of the department. It is Prof. KESSLER who is considered to be the founder of ornithology in Russia (MALCHIEVSKY & POLYANSKY 1969). In 1847 he wrote the first bird handbook on „Russian ornithology“ for this country. KESSLER was the initiator and inspirer of zoogeographical research at the university of St. Petersburg. Under his supervision expeditions were organized to the White Sea and the Arctic Ocean (1869-70, 1876, 1877, 1880), to Onega Lake (1868), the Aral-Caspian-Black Sea region (1871, 1874), to Turkistan (1872), and to Khiva (1873). Famous zoologists of that period, as F. YARZHINSKY, O. GRIMM, I. POLYAKOV, M. BOGDANOV, A. NIKOLSKY, or F. PLESKE, took part in these expeditions. All were skilled taxidermists and brought rich collections back to the museum.

M. BOGDANOV, who became head of the department after the death of KESSLER in 1881, followed this tradition. During 1881-1887 birds were studied and collected in different Russian regions: Southern Russia and Caucasus by M. BOGDANOV, Lapland by F. PLESKE, St. Petersburg Province by E. BUCHNER, Novgorod Province by V. KHLEBNIKOV, Sakhalin, Altai, Balkhash Lake, Persia, Crimea and Middle Asia by A. NIKOLSKY (SCHIMKEWITSCH & VAGNER 1899).

Additionally, several other collections were acquired from different sources. In 1873 Grand Prince ALEXIS donated to the Museum the collection of Brazilian humming birds; Dr. MEVES from Stockholm presented an egg collection; in 1872 the museum bought 787 bird specimens (including 499 mounts) from the area of St. Petersburg, prepared by the remarkable taxidermist V. ANDREEVSKY. In 1878, due to intercession of Dr. FINSCH, 32 specimens of 25 bird species came from the museum in Bremen. In 1881, V. TRETYAKOV donated the excellent mounted Griffon Vulture. In 1882, A. NIKOLSKY delivered more than 200 bird specimens from China and 64 specimens from Persia and Trans-Caucasus in 1885. In 1884, the unique black grouse hybrid collection of Mr. BILKEVICH was bought. In the 1890th 150 bird skins from the province of Orenburg, collected by N. ZARUDNY, and 300 bird skins from the province of St. Petersburg, collected by D. GLAZUNOV, were added to the collection. The special cabinets for stuffed birds were produced at that time, and until now they adorn the interior of the department.

In 1889, V. SHIMKEVITSCH became head of the department. For his famous investigations in comparative